

# Edna Pontellier Floats into the Twenty-First Century

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VILIFIED BY CRITICS WHEN IT WAS PUBLISHED IN 1899, EVEN BANNED by the public library of the city in which its author was born, *The Awakening* found a more receptive audience late in the twentieth century when it was recognized that Kate Chopin's treatment of Edna Pontellier anticipated the importance that women's issues would play in contemporary literature and popular culture. Made into the popular movie *Grand Isle* in 1991, dramatized for the stage, and the subject of numerous articles, *The Awakening* has become part of contemporary culture. Because it deals with modern themes, there has been some discussion as to whether this is a modern rather than a classical novel. Some critics treat *The Awakening* as a modern novel whose author accordingly left questions open for resolution by the reader. Although Robert Treu acknowledges that Edna Pontellier's suicide at the end of the novel is "a compelling way of reading the text," he prefers a conclusion in which she changes her mind and swims back to shore (34). Whereas Treu's alternative reading is creative and laudable for its originality, it avoids the more scholarly question as to whether *The Awakening* is a classical text, one that Roland Barthes likens to "a cupboard where meanings are shelved, stacked, safeguarded [... ] replete with signifieds which criticism will not fail to deliver" (200, 201). Or is it a modernist text, which contains what Barthes calls "a galaxy of signifiers [... ] to which] we gain access . . . by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; . . . their number is never closed" (5, 6). Barthes describes the former as a readerly text and the latter as a writerly text. In the context

of Treu's proposed ending, *The Awakening* is a modernist text if it can be argued that Chopin left it open for readers to determine for themselves whether Edna changed her mind about committing suicide after she entered the Gulf, but a classical text if Chopin had no intention of leaving that suicide ambiguous. If it can be successfully argued that Chopin left sufficient information in the text that Edna might change her mind and swim for her life, it is still a classical novel.

Jacques Barzun dated the classical period from 1650 to 1800 and the romantic period from 1800 to 1905, subdividing the latter into four phases, the last of which was naturalistic romanticism. It is appropriate that in his article, Erik Margraf associates *The Awakening* with the latter period, for Chopin's novel has the stamp of "the French naturalists, led by Zola," who, in Barzun's words, "believed for a time in the possibility of making their novels 'experimental researches' into the nature of reality" (113). Moreover, Chopin's focus on the new psychoanalytics of Freud and the social problems faced by independent-minded women illustrates the scientific bent of literary naturalism and what Barzun referred to as "the study of social plague spots, . . . [that] constituted the naturalistic stock-in-trade" (114). Treu (28) emphasizes the naturalistic roots of the novel when he calls attention to Chopin's use of the capital *N* when she wrote of Edna's "revolt against the ways of Nature" (182).

In Barthes' dichotomy, the classical novel preceded the modernist novel. Barzun allowed for such a simplification when he wrote that Russia and Poland's romantic revivals were "their first great and original literary epoch since the Renaissance," and therefore that epoch "is now called, as a result, the 'classic period' of their literary history" (98). That romantic literature, like classical literature in general, is what Barthes calls "replete" is reinforced by Barzun's observation that "romantic art is perfect art, that is, complete in the manner of Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare" (72). Ultimately, it is the fact that postrenaissance classical texts and all four phases of romantic texts are replete that justifies their inclusion in the classical portmanteau.

Because replete literature is open to only readerly interpretation, not to writerly interpretation, it is helpful to test whether *The Awakening* can be understood, as Treu usefully puts it, "without having to add anything to it" (23). Such a test can be applied to the reading of Chopin's novel by Henry Schvey, the Washington University playwright, who spent many years reading and rereading *The Awakening* as

he transformed it into a contemporary stage play. If Schvey's play is totally derivative from Chopin's novel, that provides valid empirical evidence that it is a readerly/classical text rather than a writerly/modernistic one. Treu argues that "too much critical effort can have a negative effect" and that "we might do better to suspend our impatience for narrative resolution and allow Edna to float awhile, held up by the medium that sustained her thus far" (23). Barthes' exhaustive analysis of Balzac's *Sarrasine* confirms that there can never be "too much critical effort," especially when questions of readerliness versus writerness are at stake. Based on Schvey's play, Edna's suicide can be authoritatively declared to be the main, if not the only, historically valid ending for *The Awakening*.

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As befits a meticulous reading of a classical text, Treu first looks through the pages of Chopin's novel for readerly evidence that Edna did not commit suicide at the end of *The Awakening*. He claims that "it is not at all clear that Edna's death is the most likely outcome of the sequence established in the text, . . . no more likely than a reasonably strong real-life swimmer becoming tired, panicking, and then finding the strength to reach the shore safely. . . . Even if we do infer Edna's drowning, it does not follow that her death is necessarily a suicide" (23). Although "the timing of Robert's decision to break with her" was excruciating, and her being rebuked for "not think[ing] of the children" had deeply "stricken [her] conscience," Treu doubts that these torments would have overwhelmed that "strongest possible value [that she placed] upon freedom" and concludes that what "has been read as [her] depression and defeat might as easily be read as rebellion" (28).

By setting the date of August 28 for Edna's first triumph over the sea, Treu suggests that "Chopin was likely celebrating her admiration for Wolfgang von Goethe, and particularly for his *Die Leiden Des Jungen Werthe*; . . . August 28 is not only Goethe's birthday, but Werther's as well" (31). Goethe himself "seriously contemplated suicide" over unrequited love but "was saved by hearing of the actual suicide of an acquaintance involved in a similar affair," whereupon he "wrote *Die Leiden Des Jungen Werther* in a few weeks in the spring of 1797, a creative act which he said left him 'as after a general confession, again happy and free and justified for a new life'" (Treu 31). If Treu is correct that by setting the date of Edna's awakening on August 28, Chopin

"was surely celebrating Goethe the survivor rather than Werther the suicide," this illustrates how readerly interpretation might dispute the suicide ending of this classical text (32).

Treu's most convincing arguments that Edna did not intend to drown herself are based on the novel's ending, when she stood "naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (189). "This image," Treu reasons, "must be so totally spiritualized in order to serve a suicide interpretation that it loses much of its force" (30). When "the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone, . . . Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's" (190). These memories, Treu insists, "are certainly not her life flashing before her eyes" that we would expect at the moment of death (30). The final memory of "the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks fill[ing] the air" evoke, for Treu, not Edna's anticipation of death, but "the allurements that life on the shore still possesses for [her]" (Chopin 190; Treu 30). "[A]lthough the line between suicide and survival can be razor thin," Treu argues that "the door [for Edna had] opened for discussions of the future" (30). Her "psychic survival," he believes, was motivated by the "language of rebellion and renewal" (32).

After presenting his text-based thesis that Edna did not intend to commit suicide, in much the same spirit as Barthes presented his readerly interpretation of the classical *Sarrasine*, Treu abruptly changes the tenor of his analysis:

By ending the novel at a moment of artistic opening rather than dialectic closure, [Chopin] declines the privileged position of the author and allows the reader to contemplate possibilities rather than make final judgments [herself]. In so doing she anticipates the change of attitude toward texts celebrated by Roland Barthes: . . . the birth of the reader must be required by the death of the Author. (34)

That Chopin declined to end "the novel with a funeral scene, complete with ideological clarification in the form of weeping friends [as] Goethe [did at] . . . the end of *Werther*," is Treu's final argument, this one writerly rather than readerly, that the text fails to confirm the suicide ending (34). He likewise praises the writerly endings that other Chopin critics have provided. Jill McGorkle has the exhausted swimmer suddenly reenergized with anger when she envisions her husband

discovering her drowned body and saying "How could she have gone swimming without anything on? What will everyone say?" (52; Treu 33). In a writerly spirit, Treu attributes McGorkle's alternative interpretation to "the liberating work of a couple of generations" rather than to Chopin's nineteenth-century sensibility. Other endings are Sandra Gilbert's in "The Second Coming of Aphrodite" in which "Edna dies, only to be resurrected as Venus," and Elizabeth LeBlanc's in "The Metaphorical Lesbian" in which "Edna and the ocean join in the 'ultimate' lesbian moment" (Treu 33). Treu acknowledges that these alternative endings "share in a very real contemporary desire to rescue Edna from defeat, if not from death" and suggest stances "outside of the conventional [nineteenth century] defense of 'normal' family and sexual configurations" (33, 34). Such writerly responses, Treu concludes, have "important implications for future discussions of *The Awakening*" (35). Another such response, published five years later than Treu's, is Anca Parvulescu's declaration that we "do not know if [Edna] dies, we only know she is ready to die. Or that she is ready to live as if dead" (486). In what might be read as an argument for the writerly modernism of Chopin's novel, Cristina Giorcelli claims that "the message of *The Awakening* is blurred by the dichotomies and ambiguities that pervade the entire narration. The author's wavering hold on surface and underlying meanings, ironic and serious tones, direct and indirect statements indicates a refusal to take sides and baffles judgment" (110).

*The Awakening* is a classical/readerly rather than a modernist/writerly text. Based on Chopin's text, on Schvey's reading of her text and on Freud's writings on the "death instinct" of which Chopin surely was aware, Edna did intend to, and does, commit suicide. This view is supported in recent articles by Paul Jones (277–78), A. Elizabeth Elz (20, 24, 25), and Charlotte Rich (129). Treu's scholarly and creative contribution justifiably ranks high among canonical interpretations of *The Awakening*. However, by opening the possibility that Chopin scholars have read into her work "inferences that provide a sense of closure she did not necessarily intend to give" and by explicitly associating his efforts with Barthes' call for putting the text back in the hands of readers, Treu himself brings to the forefront the important question of whether, in the spirit of Barthes, the novel should be read as classical and therefore replete, as would be the case if the author's intended meaning had been fully incorporated in the text, or as modernist and intentionally ambiguous, as would be the case if the author

purposefully left room for writerly interpretation (34). As it stands, Treu argues the point both ways.

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No better person can be found for testing whether *The Awakening* should be deemed readerly or writerly than playwright Schvey, who has spent many years developing a dramatization of that novel. The result, titled *The Awakening: A Play in Two Acts Based on the Novel by Kate Chopin*, though it has some modernist elements, is what Terry Eagleton called “traditional naturalistic theatre, with its illusion of reality” (64). Chair of the Performing Arts Department and Professor of Drama and Comparative Literature at Washington University in St. Louis, Schvey strove to write the play in time for the hundredth anniversary of Chopin’s death. It was a difficult task because most of the novel is either the thoughts of the narrator or the narrator’s description of what the heroine might be thinking, both of which had to be translated into dialogue. After many failed starts, a draft numbered 5.1 was deemed ready for the stage and was performed on two weekends—the first at Edison Theater, the second at the Missouri History Museum—in October 2004 in St. Louis, the city where Chopin was born in 1850. Schvey generously attributed his breakthrough, after many failed attempts, to the close collaboration of Annamarie Pileggi, who subsequently directed the play, and to their joint realization that the sea is a powerful and pervasive image in the novel and could be represented throughout the play by five dancers beyond a scrim, mimicking waves. This recurring, multisymbolic mimesis of waves, itself a Barthesian “galaxy of signifiers,” is one of the modernistic elements of the play. Like all of Schvey’s elaborations on Chopin’s novel, however, they are predicated on readerly rather than writerly interpretations of her text.

In the novel, the narrator recounts Edna’s romantic involvement before she met her husband, Leonce Pontellier. She was a grown young woman when

the face and figure of a great tragedian began to haunt her imagination and stir her senses. The persistence of the infatuation lent it an aspect of genuineness. The hopefulness of it colored it with the lofty tones of a great passion. The picture of the tragedian stood enframed upon her desk. . . . In the presence of others she expressed admiration for his exalted gifts, as she handed the photograph around and dwelt upon the fidelity of the likeness. When

alone she sometimes picked it up and kissed the cold glass passionately. (32)

Schvey reveals the now-popular interest in psychoanalysis when he uses this passage from the novel to elaborate some early evidence of Edna's emotional dissonance. Whereas Chopin says nothing about any personal relationship with the "great tragedian" other than the cryptic "sinister reflection," Schvey has Edna confide to Adele Ratignolle that when she first met her husband, Leonce, she "had a crush on an actor in *Romeo and Juliet*. We went backstage and he gave me his picture. I kept it under my mattress, and kissed it before going to sleep every night, until I gave birth to my first child" (24). With respect to psychoanalysis, Chopin was probably aware of the co-authored work by Breuer and Freud on hysteria, which famously broached the term "talking cure" (30). Still earlier writing on "the dark and seemingly evil forces at the core of living things" caused Barzun to perceive the romantics—Shelley, Goethe, Scott, and others—as "precursors of Freud" (62, 66). In the novel, Edna only acknowledged the "periods of despondency and suffering" which took possession of her, whereas Schvey has her reveal a behavioral pattern, lasting into her marriage, that modern viewers of his play would recognize as disturbingly neurotic (Chopin 184). Alternatively, Schvey often mutes the evidence of neurosis that Chopin does reveal. This illustrates how the playwright's contemporary psychoanalytic perspectives elaborate *The Awakening* without adding centrifugally new meanings.

There are twenty-six scenes in Schvey's dramatization, all but one of them constructed with dialogue. The exception, a single-page monologue, is the playwright's invention and may at first seem to be the kind of writerly extrapolation that Barthes associated with a modernist text. However, Barthes allowed that a classical text might have supplementary meanings that are "inexpressible, not . . . unexpressed" (216). Schvey recognizes this inexpressibility in the novel when, in the playwright's note to the playbill, he observes that in "Chopin's novel, much of the conflict is so internal and the changes so subtle, that the central character is hardly aware of what is happening to her. Changes are certainly occurring, but she is only dimly aware of them and does not know what to do about them." Although the novel's narrator describes some of Edna's thoughts, to a great extent they remain inexpressible. Schvey expands on the inexpressible in Chopin's novel with

a story, actually a myth, that Edna tells her two infant sons. The sons never appear on stage, and their presence is left to the audience's imagination. In the first paragraph of the myth, Schvey has her tell the children that

Once upon a time there was a tiger, and this animal was born in a cage made out of iron. And he grew in strength and beauty under the care of his keeper. There was never any hunger; there was always enough food. Whenever the tiger was thirsty, water appeared in a gleaming bowl as if by magic; when he was tired, a bed of straw was provided for his rest. And so the tiger found it good, and he licked his beautiful flanks, and basked in the sunbeams that existed for the sole purpose of brightening each day, or so he thought. (74)

Although in Chopin's novel Edna does not tell such a story to her sons, she herself is compared with "a beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun" (116). Gary Hoppenstand has written a monograph, *In Search of the Paper Tiger*, that provides insight on Schvey's metaphor. Because "[t]igers can be viewed any number of ways," Hoppenstand observes, this animal is a "most remarkable creature of perception. . . . No one in his right mind would ever suggest that tigers and fiction are similar, but they are. After all, it is merely a matter of perception" (9). The story told by Edna evokes Hoppenstand's description of "tigers [as] beautifully symmetrical animals, possessing grace, form, color and enigma" (9). The solicitous keeper provides for the physical needs of the tiger very much as Leonce provides for Edna. In the second paragraph of the monologue, Edna recounts how

One day, as he awakened from a deep sleep, the tiger noticed that the door of his cage was open; it had been left open by accident. He crouched in a corner terrified. Slowly he approached the door to the cage and, frightened of the unknown, would gladly have shut the door had he only known how. But he could not. Finally, he thrusts his head out and sees the bright sky and the world outside. He returns to his corner now, but cannot rest. Again and again he goes to the open door, and each time he sees more and more light. Then one time he stands in the flood of it, takes a deep breath, leaps forward, and is gone! (Schvey 74)

Hoppenstand reveals a different aspect of the tiger, that of a wild creature "functioning according to the designs of nature within a particular ecological environment" (9). It is the call of his nature that



summons the tiger, despite his fears, from the cage. Likewise, Edna, who first dreaded going into the Gulf “unless there was a hand nearby that might reach out and reassure her,” suddenly grew “daring and reckless” and found that she could swim (Chopin 47). As befits naturalist literature, both the tiger and Edna are responding to Nature’s call. The tiger’s awakening symbolizes Edna’s. In the final paragraph, the beast

rushes forward in mad flight—seeing, sniffing, touching all things. He even drinks from a foul pool, thinking it sweet. He is hungry now, and finds he must kill for food that used to be his without question. His limbs are weary and his throat is parched before he can find water that satisfies his terrible thirst. And so the tiger lived on, seeking, finding, suffering. And to this day, the door which was left open by accident still remains open, but the tiger’s cage is forever empty. (74)

This paragraph evokes Hoppenstand’s perceptions of the “tiger, hunting and killing . . . [as its] means of survival” (9). The seeking, finding and suffering are what Edna is actually experiencing, and the empty cage is the family home on Esplanade Street that she will leave behind.

For Hoppenstand, myths “are universal structures within which their participants identify and locate their own life experiences” (16). Jacques Lacan, the renowned French psychoanalyst who made major contributions to literary criticism, wrote of the technique “in which the analyst teaches the subject to apprehend himself as an object” (91); it may have been in that psychoanalytic vein that Schvey had Edna apprehend herself as a tiger. Hoppenstand does not speak of the tiger as being “terrified” or “frightened of the unknown,” for this is Edna projecting what Lacan calls “the symbols of the unconscious . . . beside the embalmed forms in which myths are presented in our story-books” (69). The three paragraphs of Schvey’s tiger monologue roughly correspond to what Lacan calls “the decomposed trinity of the ego, the superego, and the id,” respectively (71). The tiger myth suggests that Edna is subconsciously fearful of the devastation that her new lifestyle will inflict on her well-intentioned husband and their young sons. The tiger’s awakening dramatically reveals Edna’s feelings when she tells Dr. Mandelet that “perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life” (Chopin

184). Schvey might have meant this bedtime story as Edna's internalization of a social myth promising dire punishment to those who fail to honor their societal commitments.

The major hurdle faced by Schvey may not have been the dearth of dialogue in this novel, as he claimed, but the overwhelming repleteness of the narrative. It would be difficult to portray a believable Edna on the stage with all the extremes that Chopin attributes to her in the novel. Beset by inner voices, the novel depicts her

taking off her wedding ring [and flinging] it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make . . . a mark upon the little glittering circlet. In a sweeping passion she seized a glass vase from the table and flung it upon the tiles of the hearth. She wanted to destroy something. (87)

In the corresponding scene in the play, with her anguish represented by the image of the beating waves upstage, Edna "tries desperately to remove her wedding ring, but cannot. Dips her ring finger in glass of wine; it comes off. The sea grows calmer. She drops ring in the glass, and watches it sink to the bottom" (Schvey 54). Perhaps to keep her character realistic on the stage, Schvey chose to represent Edna's extremes of passion through the mimetic waves, through other peoples' less-agitated voices, and through her tiger confession, rather than through the destructive violence that the novel articulates. This mutes an important psychoanalytic symbol of the death wish. In his monumental work on Freud, Ernest Jones explained Freud's view that there is a "destructiveness instinct" that is equivalent to the "death instinct" except that it is "directed outward" (273). The connection of *Eros* and *Thanatos* is symbolized by the wedding ring and breaking glass. It reflects the overwhelming repleteness of Chopin's novel that Edna's destructiveness resonates more disturbingly in its pages than on Schvey's stage.

On the evening of Edna's awakening, after she had dared to swim so far out that for a time she was in terror that she would drown, her handsome young admirer, Robert Lebrun, asks her in the novel if she did not know that

this was the twenty-eighth of August? . . . On the twenty-eighth of August, at the hour of midnight, . . . a spirit that has haunted these

shores for ages rises up from the Gulf. With its own penetrating vision the spirit seeks some one mortal worthy to hold him company, worthy of being exalted for a few hours into realms of the semicelestials. His search has always hitherto been fruitless, and he has sunk back, disheartened, into the sea. But tonight he found Mrs. Pontellier. Perhaps he will never wholly release her from the spell. Perhaps she will never again suffer a poor, unworthy earthling to walk in the shadow of her divine presence. (49–50)

In the corresponding scene in the play, in which the date is arbitrarily changed from August 28, Robert informs Edna that

every July twenty-first, when the moon is full, the Spirit of the Gulf returns to earth and searches for some mortal to carry off to his underwater kingdom. Usually he returns to his realm alone, but tonight he found someone—someone with whom he can share his kingdom beneath the waves. Perhaps he will never again release you from his spell; perhaps you will never again be satisfied with mere mortals. (Schvey 35)

Whereas Chopin's wording simply romanticizes the imaginary meeting in the realm of the semicelestials, Schvey's ominously envisages Edna being carried off to the underwater kingdom, presaging her suicide by drowning at the end of the play. Such subtle interpolations on the part of the playwright enrich the dialogic content of the play; they are not *required* for filling in the kind of tension-generating lacunae that characterize a modernist or writerly text.

After the intimate dinner party that Edna had given in the Pigeon House, Alcée Arobin lingered on to be alone with Edna. In the novel,

He seated himself beside her and kissed her lightly on the shoulder. "I thought you were going away," she said, in an uneven voice. "I am, after I have said goodnight."  
"Good night," she murmured.

He did not answer, except to continue to caress her. He did not say good night until she had become supple to his gentle, seductive entreaties. (154)

Schvey recreates the same scene a little differently. At Edna's dinner party, there has been more liquor; Mademoiselle Reisz "had so much to drink she practically had to be carried home" (92). According to the stage directions that conclude the scene, Arobin comes

downstage, kneels down beside her and begins stroking and gently massaging her neck and shoulders. He attempts to remove the mask, but Edna refuses to allow it. He opens her bodice, and kisses her passionately. She remains passive, allowing herself to have her body explored, as the lights fade. (93)

Playgoers naturally presume, as the house darkens, that the two are finally consummating their relationship. The mask, which is not even mentioned in the novel, has enabled her to surrender herself. *Eros'* gain must now be balanced by *Thanatos'*.

But is Schvey being readerly or writerly when he has Alcée Arobin grope Edna and then dims the stage lights to suggest that sexual intercourse ensued? Others have read the novel this same way. Elaine Showalter concludes that "seductive" signifies "seduces" and that a full-blown "affair with Arobin" has begun when he "did not say good night until she had become supple to his gentle, seductive entreaties" (44, 50); Andrew Delbanco cringes at the "gathering darkness about [Edna's] succession of lovers" (101); Michael Gilmore perceives Edna's life as a "career of sexual . . . trespasses" (68); Anca Parvulescu is certain that Edna "*decides* to have sex" with Arobin (483); and Sue Monk Kidd affirms Edna's adultery in her novel, *The Mermaid Chair*, which is a reworking of *The Awakening* into popular culture. By citing information from one of Chopin's biographers that she "apparently engaged in an affair with a married man, Albert Sampite, possibly consummating the affair even before [her husband's] death," Charlotte Rich implies that Chopin may have been re-experiencing her own past through Edna's "assignment with Alcée Arobin" (123, 124).

A close reading of the novel discourages this interpretation of indiscretion. New Orleans Creole society appears to have been very much a part of the Victorian Era. Edna has done no more than "become supple to [Arobin's] gentle, seductive entreaties" and in subsequent partings he simply "kissed her hand and went away" (154, 170). In their final, late night separation, he seems only to have "detected the latent sensuality, which enfolded under his delicate sense of her nature's requirements like a torpid, torrid, sensitive blossom" (173). Had Chopin written the last paragraph in Chapter 31 without the phrase "He did not say good night until" but simply merged the two sentences to "He did not answer, except to continue to caress her until she had become supple to his gentle, seductive entreaties," its location at the end of the chapter, like the corresponding scene in Schvey's play, would have validated Schvey's,

Delbanco's, Showalter's, Parvulescu's, and Rich's carnal interpretation (154). In fact, it appears that Edna's true love was Robert. This is palpably evident in their final meeting in the novel when she takes Robert's

face between her hands and looked into it as if she would never withdraw her eyes more. She kissed him on the forehead, the eyes, the cheeks, and the lips. . . . "I love you," she whispered, "only you, no one but you. It was you who awoke me last summer out of a long-life, stupid dream. . . . Now you are here we shall love each other my Robert . . . Nothing else in the world is of any consequence." (Chopin 179)

Alternatively, in their final encounter in Schvey's play, Robert frustrates her attempt to kiss him, and it is he alone who verbalizes his love, and then only in writing. By choosing to interpret the scene at the end of Chapter 21 as coital, Schvey avoided having to convince playgoers that Edna could commit adultery with Arobin while feeling heartfelt love for Robert.

The final scene of the play takes place in the Pigeon House, where, unlike Chopin's novel in which Robert has given up waiting for her and already fled, Schvey has the two confront one another and experience the painful finality of separation. This is the only scene in the play in which the stage is transformed without a change in scene—specifically, from the Pigeon House into the beach at Grand Isle. Edna is alone facing the audience: "she begins to walk downstage toward the water, and as she does, the people whom she has known rise up from the waves upstage" (Schvey 116). Leonce, Adele, Mademoiselle Reisz, Arobin, Dr. Mandelet, and finally Robert appear one by one in this epistemologically vague, modernistic scene, each surrealistically sinking beneath the waves after his or her brief final dialogue with Edna. Whereas Treu argues that her suicide would have been more convincing had the novel ended with a funeral scene and weeping friends, Schvey provides some of the same "ideological clarification" for the suicide with this vision of Edna's former friends and husband extending their poignant farewells. Adele's vision pleads:

You must remember your little ones! You must remember them! (*we hear the sound of two young boys shouting "Mama! Mama!"*) We are mothers, our lives don't matter, it's all for them, only them! You must remember *them*! What you're doing is selfish, selfish! (*sinks beneath the waves*). (Schvey 117)

Edna replies to the sinking vision: "I said I would sacrifice my life for them, Adele; not my self. (*Edna continues to undress*)" (117). Nineteenth-century readers of Chopin's novel, not attuned to neurotic suffering, generally concluded, and were not unhappy, that Edna took her own life because in their view justice had been served. They too apparently believed that Edna had been unfaithful.

Schvey's audiences are even more likely on leaving the theater—than Chopin's readers on closing their books—to believe that Edna has drowned. It is unambiguous that she intends to "sacrifice [her] life" (Schvey 117). The final lines of the play are hers as she stands naked at the ocean shore:

This feels so strange, so pure, like being born for the first time. I can feel the foam curling around my ankles, pricking at the soles of my feet. I love it. I am ready to swim again, now. It is time to have you wrap yourself around me. Yes. I am ready now. (*she moves deeper into the sea as the lights fade*) END OF PLAY. (Schvey 118)

Edna's euphoria at the prospect of sharing the Spirit of the Gulf's kingdom beneath the waves evokes what Freud called the Nirvana Principle—"the reduction of tensions to zero"—that according to Jean Laplanche's appraisal, "reasserts the priority of the tendency toward absolute zero or the 'death drive'" (108, 117). In Freud's own words, the "Nirvana principle . . . is one of our strongest reasons for believing in the existence of death instincts" (50). This is a far different interpretation of Edna's drowning than that of Wendy Martin, who sees it as "an act without will," the consequence of her being overpowered by exhaustion (23).

Gilmore is fascinated with the repetitions in *The Awakening*, starting with the parrot's "repeating over and over" his ominous "Allez vous-en!" in the first line of the novel and then, near the end of the novel, the "verbal approximations of the sounds of the sea . . ." Successive participles—"never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude"—conveying the gently rocking motion of the waves" (81). Chopin herself repeats the same phrases that Gilmore quotes, on page 25 of Chapter 6 as well as on page 189 of the final chapter. Whereas Gilmore connects the "iterative rhythms . . . of the sea" and their "concentrated repetitions" to the "perception of music as a purely expressive art form," they also have Freudian connotations (81). The "compulsion to repeat," explains

James Strachey in the editor's note to his translation of Freud's volume, is "a phenomenon exhibited in the behavior of children and in psychoanalytic treatment" (ix, x). Symbolism, the penultimate phase of romanticism, and naturalism come together in *The Awakening* with Freud's remark that "the repetition-compulsion was the first motive for his postulating a death instinct" (Jones 272).

In Schvey's rendition, Edna's suicide is mandated on four psychoanalytic premises. Her allurements to the ceaseless waves, though calming, is associated with the death instinct. According to Freudian theory, her intense commitment to *Eros* must have an "equal validity and status" to her attraction to *Thanatos*—the two "in constant struggle with each other, although the latter inevitably [wins] in the end" (Jones 273). Edna's destructiveness to her children, her husband, her society and her property revealed her own death wish "directed outward" (272). Finally, her euphoric anticipation of Nirvana beneath the waves reasserts her wish for death. Schopenhauer "taught that 'death is the goal of life,'" and "Goethe himself," whom Chopin so much admired, "had expressed in one of his conversations a very similar idea" (Jones 273). To use Lacan's words, Edna has brought her "solitude to realization, . . . in the full assumption of [her] being-for-death" (Lacan 105).

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Whereas Treu emphasizes Edna's frustration with society's views of her responsibilities to her children, her husband and his business clients, Schvey builds a psychoanalytic case for Edna's unhappiness, tracing her problems well back into her motherless childhood. In a recent article, Sean Heuston warns that "[c]ontemporary readers must remember not to take for granted the kinds of basic psychological models . . . that might now seem all but self-evident to them. Chopin published *The Awakening* in 1899, well before Freudian psychological concepts became widely known in America" (222). Although it is true that Schvey's play builds on psychoanalytic concepts—repetition compulsion, *Eros* versus *Thanatos*, destructiveness and the Nirvana principle—which Freud published after Chopin wrote the novel, similar views of death were current in the late romantic periods. The second law of thermodynamics, which Clausius and Thomson (Lord Kelvin) independently formalized in 1850, and the consequent "idea of the universe running down," wrote Jones, "easily suggested [before

Freud} that the tendency to death implied in the death instinct was only a particular aspect of the general physical law" (276). It is interesting that *death instinct*, *Thanatos*, and *Eros* appear in Cristina Giorcelli's article on *The Awakening*, even though her focus is not explicitly psychoanalytic (117, 131).

Schvey has indicated, based on the results of the performances in 2004, that he is continuing to revise his dramatization of *The Awakening*. Hopefully, a later draft, presumably 5.2, will eventually be performed outside of the Midwest. A wider viewing of the play will promote the current revival of interest in *The Awakening*, now generally recognized "as the first aesthetically successful novel to have been written by an American woman" (Showalter 34). There are several small but easily correctible errors in the dramatization that do err on the writerly side. By changing the date of Edna's awakening from 28 August to 21 July, Schvey obfuscated an aspect of the novel that both Treu's and Giorcelli's (138) research found symbolically significant for Chopin. Although Schvey was careful to emphasize in the playbill that his dramatization was purely an adaptation of Chopin's novel, this gratuitous alteration is counterproductive. A second case of dubious writerliness in the play concludes Dr. Mandalet's final entreaty to Edna to come to his office: "Mrs. Pontellier, please come by and see me. Say you'll come by tomorrow! We can talk and have a nice cup of tea, and . . . talk. Please, Mrs. Pontellier! It's important for you to listen!" (Schvey 114). It is ambiguous in the play whether the doctor is telling Edna that "It's important" for her (1) to listen to his invitation to come to him or (2) to listen to what he has to tell her when she does come. She has already been lectured to enough. It is clear in both the novel and the play that Edna admits to her "despondency and suffering" and has a lot to talk about to an understanding and attentive therapist (Chopin 184). Granted that Edna has remained inviolate, Schvey is being writerly in the stage directions in which he has Arobin open "her bodice, and kiss her passionately" while she "remains passive, allowing herself to have her body explored" (93). Except for these two minor instances in which Schvey blurs rather than clarifies the novel, he provides what Eagleton calls "a transformation of the text into a unique product . . . in accordance with the specific demands and conditions of theatrical performance" (51). If Schvey's avoidance of Edna's temperamental extremes, as when she broke a glass vase or desperately declared her love for Robert, were made "in accordance with the specific



demands and conditions of theatrical performance,” those omissions may have been justified. The fact that Schvey had to suppress considerable amounts of relevant information in the novel in order to meet the demands and conditions of theatrical performance attest to the repleteness of this classical novel.

Barthes concluded his analysis in *S/Z* with an important qualification that, although the classical text is “replete with meaning . . . , it still seems to be keeping in reserve some ultimate meaning” (216). What he may have had in mind were normative, not positivistic questions such as whether or not Edna succeeded in committing suicide in *The Awakening* (217). Giorcelli poses numerous such normative questions in her article, as for example, the “question of whether Chopin intend[ed] Edna’s disappearance to be regarded as a victory (the mythical apotheosis of her integrity, whatever its cost) or a defeat (the inevitable outcome of her hubris, whatever its motivation)” (109). It is normative questions such as this that give “meaning its last closure: suspension” without negating the novel’s readerliness (Barthes 217).

## Note

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